
SHORT NOTES

The Yellow-bellied Sea Snake *Pelamis platurus* in the Northern Territory

Of the fifty or more sea snake species that are found throughout the tropical waters of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the Yellow-Bellied Sea Snake *Pelamis platurus* has the widest distribution. The pelagic existence of this species is in contrast with the more inshore and bottom-dwelling habits of the other species of sea snakes and sea kraits. The Yellow-Bellied Sea Snake is found from the Indian Ocean shores of southern Africa, through the tropical waters of South East Asia to the Pacific Ocean shores of Central America (Cogger 1975). Ocean currents carry specimens into the temperate waters of New Zealand (McCann 1966) and Tasmania (Cogger 1975). Along the south-east and south-west coasts (28°S to 33°S) of Australia the species is commonly encountered on beaches where it is washed after storms. As many of these specimens are taken to museums for identification, the Yellow-Bellied Sea Snake has been labelled as Australia's most common sea snake species (Krefft 1869; Kinghorn 1956). In contrast with the prevalence of this species on southern shores, it is rarely collected in Northern Territory waters.

In 1819, King described a specimen near Lacrosse Island near the present Northern Territory and Western Australian border. The snake was "three feet long; its back was black and belly yellow and the tail striped black and white." (King 1827, vol 1: 288). The conspicuous markings of the species ensured its inclusion in naturalist's notes. In September 1856, Thomas Baines sketched and painted a Yellow-Bellied Sea Snake which was caught by a crew member of the "Messenger" when off the coast of Flores, Indonesia. It was pickled in a bottle of rum, and described as "of rather venomous appearance" (Braddon 1986). Museum records reveal a steady rate of collection of the species since 1904 from several localities in the Arafura and Timor Seas and from the coast of northern Australia in general (Table 1). This reflects collecting effort from this largely uninhabited coastline rather than abundance of this species.

In the South-east Asian region, the Yellow Bellied Sea Snake is known from a number of localities. Specimens are reported from Flores and Ambon (de Rooij 1917), and single records from Cocos-Keeling Island (Gibson-Hill 1950), Christmas Island (Table 1), and Ashmore Reef (Minton & Heatwole 1975). Several specimens have been collected from the Gulf of Carpentaria (Heatwole 1975; Covacevich & Couper 1991; Table 1). A single specimen of this species was collected from the Torres Strait region during the Soviet sea snake surveys and was thought to indicate that the species was carried into the Arafura and Timor Seas by currents from the Coral Sea (Shuntov 1972).

In November 1988, I collected a freshly beach-washed, dead, male specimen (Plate 7) from Dundee Beach, Fog Bay (12°41'S, 130°21'E). Its snout-vent length was 578

mm, tail length 82 mm, and weight, 127 g. The animal was in good condition with no sign of commensal organisms which might indicate a prolonged period of ill health. The scale rows at the mid body numbered 49 with 321 ventral scales and 47 subcaudals. In size, colour and scalation this specimen is similar to other Australian specimens. Like many of the specimens in Australian museums, this individual had been stranded by a combination of an ebbing tide and onshore winds.



PLATE 7 The male Yellow-Bellied Sea Snake washed ashore at Dundee Beach, Fog Bay in November 1988 (M. Guinea)

As reproductively mature and immature specimens have been collected off the New South Wales and Western Australian coasts, it has been assumed that these waters support viable populations of the Yellow-Bellied Sea Snake (Cogger 1975). The population status of this species in Northern Territory waters remains unclear. The small snout-vent lengths of R.2081 (154 mm) and R.13210 (310 mm) (Table 1) are indicative of immaturity, and suggest local breeding. Are Northern Territory specimens simply waifs that have been blown from their normal range as assumed by Shuntov (1972), or are they part of a geographically discrete yet seldom encountered breeding population? More specimens are required and any beach washed animals presented to the Northern Territory Museum could significantly improve our knowledge of this species.

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TABLE 1 Museum specimens of the Yellow-Bellied Sea Snake *Pelamis platurus* that were collected from the Arafura and Timor Seas, Gulf of Carpentaria and the North Australian province of the Indian Ocean. AM, Australian Museum; WAM, Western Australian Museum; and NTM, Northern Territory Museum.

Museum	Specimen No.	Locality	Year of collection
AM	R.3390	Darwin Harbour N.T.	1902
AM	R.14426	Arafura Sea	1949
AM	R.44551	Gulf of Carpentaria	1961
AM	R.44553	Gulf of Carpentaria	1961
AM	R.21243	Kurumba, Gulf of Carpentaria	1964
AM	R.42005	Ashmore Reef, Timor Sea	1972
AM	R.39018	Ashmore Reef, Timor Sea	1973
AM	R.37362	Thursday Island	1972
WAM	39747	Christmas Island, Indian Ocean	1969
WAM	46134	Dillon Shoals, Timor Sea	1974
NTM	R.17799	York Sound, W.A.	1975
NTM	R.2081	Weipa, Gulf of Carpentaria	1975
NTM	R.13210	Cape Wessel, Arafura Sea	1985

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